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Ghost Towns of Kansas: a Traveler's Guide

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Mormon history or any nonstudent interested in retracing the steps of the great migration to Salt Lake City.

Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler's Guide, by Daniel Fitzgerald. Foreword by Joseph W. Snell. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988. xiv, 348 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY SUSANNE GEORGE, KEARNEY STATE COLLEGE

Ghost Towns of Kansas, a culmination of ten years of research by Daniel C. Fitzgerald, focuses on one hundred towns that blossomed briefly on the plains. The book is a helpful guide for history buffs, photographers, and artifact collectors in locating these "dead-towns" scattered across Kansas. Fitzgerald breathes life into these forgotten settlements, finding in each community a unique personality. Steamboat towns, health resorts, coal and oil settlements, military posts, and farming communities come alive, with wagons rumbling down dusty streets and gunshots ricocheting off county courthouses. The book could be subtitled "Biographies in Plains History."

Some of these "children of Kansas" were dreamers: Octagon City hoped to create a vegetarian utopia, while Pawnee wanted to be the state capital. Others were tenacious, such as Irving, which survived a series of natural disasters: two tornadoes, two floods, and two major fires within nine years. Still others grew up rough and rowdy: the infamous Trail City was "so clogged with prostitutes that they overflowed the brothels and hotels and set up shops and tents along the city's streets" (288). Fitzgerald manages to rattle some skeletons in the community closets and even to awaken some lingering ghosts.

However diverse their origins and aims, patterns seem to emerge in the downfall of these once thriving and hopeful communities. Dissension over slavery, over the establishment of county seats, and over the routing of railroads pitted neighbor against neighbor. Natural disasters, such as tornadoes, floods, droughts, blizzards, fires, and grasshoppers, destroyed what homesteaders had so painstakingly created on the harsh prairie, while economic panics aggravated their distress. Using primary sources, Fitzgerald analyzes the causes of the decline of each settlement, making this work an important addition to American studies.

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